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ABSTRACT

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BRIDGING THE REPUBLICAN GENDER GAP: ELIZABETH DOLE SPEAKS TO AND ABOUT WOMEN

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ABSTRACT

The 1988 presidential race was predicted to be one in which women voters would determine the winner. In most polls taken prior to the nominating conventions, George Bush trailed Michael Dukakis and much of the difference was attributable to women voters. At the Republican convention in August, Republicans began a well-orchestrated effort to create a new image for George Bush that would appeal to women as well as other constituencies he needed to attract for victory in November. Elizabeth Dole, the convention's temporary chair, incorporated elements of the strategy into her speech on opening night. Dole use of identification strategies enabled her to present Bush as the candidate better able to protect the economic well-being of women who were part of the work force either by choice or necessity as well as preserve and protect traditional family values.

As Republicans prepared to descend on New Orleans in mid-August of 1988 to nominate the heir apparent to the Reagan Revolution, they knew the heir lacked the charisma of the man he had served for eight years. In preparing for what pollsters and pundits predicted would be a close race, Republicans knew one group of voters -- women -- could tip the scales in favor of or against George Bush.

Since spring when Bush and Democratic nominee, Michael Dukakis, had locked up their respective party's nominations, polls showed Bush trailing Dukakis by as much as 32 points among women voters.[1] One week prior to the Democratic convention in July, a Gallup Poll indicated the importance of the "gender gap" in a close race. The poll taken July 8-10 gave Dukakis a "47-41 percentage edge over Bush, a lead due solely to the Democrat's 13 percentage point advantage among women. Among men, the poll gave Bush a 4 percentage point lead over Dukakis."[2]

With women making up 53 percent of the voters and potentially casting 10 million more votes than men on November,[3] Bush strategists had to do something to make women forget that someone had once described Bush as "every woman's first husband." The New Orleans convention offered the opportunity to begin the makeover.

One of the individuals selected to assist with recasting George Bush as the devoted husband, father, grandfather, and champion of women was Elizabeth Dole. Dole's husband, Robert, had been defeated by Bush in the primaries and both Doles were still being listed by the press for the vice-presidential slot when the convention opened

August 15. As the convention's temporary chair, Elizabeth Dole addressed the delegates on opening night.

While Dole's speech was brief, approximately ten minutes, and received little attention in the press the following day, it was representative of the overall Bush strategy to woo women voters by appealing to economic concerns and quality of life issues.[4] By identifying the Republican party as the one that protected a woman's right to choose work or home, or, in the case of women for whom there was no choice, to safeguard their jobs, health care, safety, and children's education, Republicans believed they could improve their chances of holding the White House.

This analysis of Elizabeth Dole's speech as temporary chair of the 1988 Republican National Convention examines the identification strategies she employed to represent the Republican party as the party better able to address women's issues.

Elizabeth Dole as Symbol of Opportunity and Success for Women

Early in Elizabeth Dole's speech, she paid tribute to her former boss, Ronald Reagan, acknowledged the privilege of serving him for seven years, and addressed him in his box above the convention floor with these words, "Thank you, Mr. President, for that opportunity."

A Phi Beta Kappa graduate of Duke, a Harvard Law graduate, a Federal Trade Commissioner in the Ford administration, and White House Assistant for Public Liaison and Secretary of Transportation for Reagan, Elizabeth Hanford Dole is not a typical female Horatio Alger. Born into an upper middle class Southern family, Liddy Dole had the pedigree for success long before Ronald Reagan entered the White House and provided her with an "opportunity." As the wife of the Senate minority leader and 1988 presidential candidate, Robert

Dole, she is one-half of Washington's "power couple."

Dole both symbolizes the modern career woman who shares an equal relationship with her husband and the more traditional woman who takes a back seat to her husband's career. Twice, Dole resigned from government service to further her husband's political ambitions. First when Bob Dole ran for vice president with Gerald Ford in 1976, she resigned from the Federal Trade Commission, and in 1988 when he sought the presidency, she stepped down as Secretary of Transportation. The latter resignation produced outcries from feminists who believed Dole had caved in to a double standard. She was criticized in the press for neglecting her cabinet duties to campaign while several elected officials spent more time on the campaign trail than they did tending to their constituents. Dole defended her decision as one of freedom of choice, a theme she invoked frequently during her speech.

While Elizabeth Dole has appeal to both feminists and traditionalists as a result of her career choices, it is more difficult to cast her as one who can identify with working women and mothers for whom no economic freedom of choice exists. Dole, the stepmother of a grown woman, never had to worry about day care, the quality of public education, or the teen-age drug problem on a personal level. However, the identification strategies employed in her speech did not necessitate personal identification with her audience. Rather, Dole adhered to the aforementioned Republican strategy of convincing women that the Republican party was better able to protect their overall economic interests. This strategy enabled her to appeal to traditional values as a representative of a party seeking to enact those values through the presidency rather than as an individual exemplifying them through her personal experiences and

choices.

Identification Strategies

Kenneth Burke explains the concepts of identification and consubstantiality In *A Rhetoric of Motives:*

> A is not identical with his colleague, B. But insofar as their interests are joined, A is identified with B . . . . In being identified with B, A is 'substantially one' with a person other than himself. Yet at the same time he remains unique, an individual locus of motives. Thus, he is both joined and separate at once a distinct substance and consubstantial with another.[5]

Elizabeth Dole, while not identical with most of the American women to whom she appealed in her convention speech, attempted to demonstrate that their interests were indeed joined and were best served by the Republican party and its standard bearer.

Dole began her speech with an appeal to Democrats to look to the Republican Party for answers to their concerns about the deficit, taxes, and spending. She acknowledged her own defection from the Democratic party and assured others it was all right to do so in the names of "peace, progress, and opportunity." Later in the speech she subtly acknowledged the gender gap issue when she said, "let me say to the women of America, I respect the fact that some of you have questions. I also ask you to have an open mind."

In a segment of the speech in which she castigated the Democratic nominee, she challenged Dukakis' claim that the issue in 1988 was competence not ideology with the statement that "This election is about ideas and ideology. They do matter. They will matter to Americans who face a choice this year as stark and dramatic as any in memory." It was this emphasis on ideology as well as the improved economy during the Reagan years that would serve the Republican party well throughout the entirety of the campaign.

Throughout the major portion of the speech, which was a direct

appeal to women, Dole wove economic and ideological appeals. She told women that

> Today's strong economy means stronger families, and we affirm the woman who chooses to work in the home. But our strong economy has also provided needed jobs for millions of women. . . . . You know better than anyone that a job, a good job, is absolutely basic to a family's happiness and stability. That's our freedom. Are we going to let them take it away? (Crowd responds, 'No!')

The question to the crowd was repeated two more times: once after telling women that two-thirds of the 17 million jobs created during the Reagan administration went to women and again after crediting Ronald Reagan and George Bush with setting "in motion the forces which allowed that growth to occur and the economy to bloom." While the audience participation strategy lacked the impact of Teddy Kennedy's "Where was George?" in his speech at the Democratic National Convention, the question essentially summarized the Bush strategy of planting the seed in women's minds that Michael Dukakis would jeopardize their economic livelihood.

Providing a *division* between the economic promise of Republican leadership and Democrats' failures is essential to Burke's notion of identification. Burke explained that "If men were not apart from one another, there would be no need for the rhetorician to proclaim their unity."[6]

> Dole identified the division with this admonition:
> If this great economic upswing is stopped. If we have a President who raises taxes again and increases regulation again and stifles growth again, and believe me, that's what Michael Dukakis will do. If we let the liberals back in, we lose all that progress, your progress. We women would be especially vulnerable. We're always vulnerable when jobs are cut back and the economy stagnates.

The division Dole drew between the economic policies of the two candidates was not her only one. In a foreshadowing of the less

lofty side of the Republican campaign, Dole played on the fears of more conservative members of her audience by attacking Dukakis' day care plan. Her imagery was that of 1984-like child care in which the Democrat's plan would "march our kids lock step to a government institution where Washington will set all the rules."

As an extension of her claim that "One size does not fit all," for child care she contrasted the Dukakis plan with that of George Bush, "a father of five, a grandfather of 10 ¨who} will give American parents what they want." Throughout the remainder of her speech, Dole continued to extol Bush's virtues as one who would "keep faith with the timeless values on which this great nation was founded, even as he leads our nation into a greater future."

Women, even in their modern roles are still seen as maintaining their classical role of mothers and caretakers. By expressing concern for the economic vulnerability of women which could jeopardize their role as caretakers, Dole helped set in motion the Republican's strategy to capture women's attention. By referring to Bush as father and husband, she set the stage for the display of family that took place in New Orleans as well as for Bush's acceptance speech theme of a "kinder, gentler America."

The Shift in the Gender Gap

Taken as a small part of a larger game plan to change George Bush's image among women voters, Elizabeth Dole's convention speech illustrates the Republican identification strategies which all but eliminated the gender gap in the polls. As a woman speaking purely to other women, Dole spoke about their fears even if she had not personally experienced all of them. As a Republican speaking both to and about women, she invited women to determine who best understood those fears. Unlike both the women and men at the Democratic conven-

tion who spoke about leadership and competence, Elizabeth Dole, George Bush, and others carrying the Republican banner in New Orleans and throughout the campaign spoke about the emotional issues that leaders must stir.

Writing in mid-October after the second Bush-Dukakis debate, columnist Ellen Goodman summarized what began with the temporary chair's address and ultimately ended in George Bush's election:

> But what a long, long way from June to October. In the last polls, a modest gender gap remained, but the advantage among women had slipped away. By the end of Thursday night's debate, the images of the two candidates had almost flip-flopped. What happened to the women's vote was simple: The Democrats took women for granted. It was the Republicans who came knocking at the door. . . . They knew he needed a language that resonated in women's ears as well . . . . using the language of values, Bush spoke to their fears of crime and environmental pollution.[7]

In speaking to women's fears, Elizabeth Dole and later George Bush were able to bridge the gap between the candidate and women voters. While it was impossible to actually close the gap because ideologically Michael Dukakis was still closer to women, the identification strategies used by Dole and the Bush campaign allowed them to find sufficient common ground to encourage women to rethink the choice they would make on November 8, 1988.

NOTES

1. Margaret B. Carlson, "Shoot Out at Gender Gap," *Time*, 8 August

1988, 14.

2. Rhodes Cook, "Dukakis Shows Potential for Broad Fall Appeal," *Congressional Quarterly Weekly Report*, 46, 16 July 1988, 1951.

3. James N. Baker, "Closing the Gender Gap," *Newsweek*, 24 October 1988, 22.

4. According to the *Time* story on August 8, 1988 Bush aides planned to "close the gender gap by stressing economic prosperity and trying to convince women that the G.O.P.'s free-enterprise, anti-Government approach to the economy is the better way to go. . . . Deborah Steelman, domestic policy adviser for Bush, is one of the late-arriving female officials in the Bush campaign. 'As soon as we connect Republican superiority in managing the economy to these quality-of-life issues -- education, crime prevention, environmental protection -- the gender gap will disappear,' she says."

5. Kenneth Burke, *A Rhetoric of Motives* (1950 rpt.; Berkeley: University of California, 1969), 20-21.

6. Burke, 22.

7. Ellen Goodman, "Bush's efforts to attract women voters have paid off handsomely," *The Wichita Eagle-Beacon*, 15 October 1988, 3D.